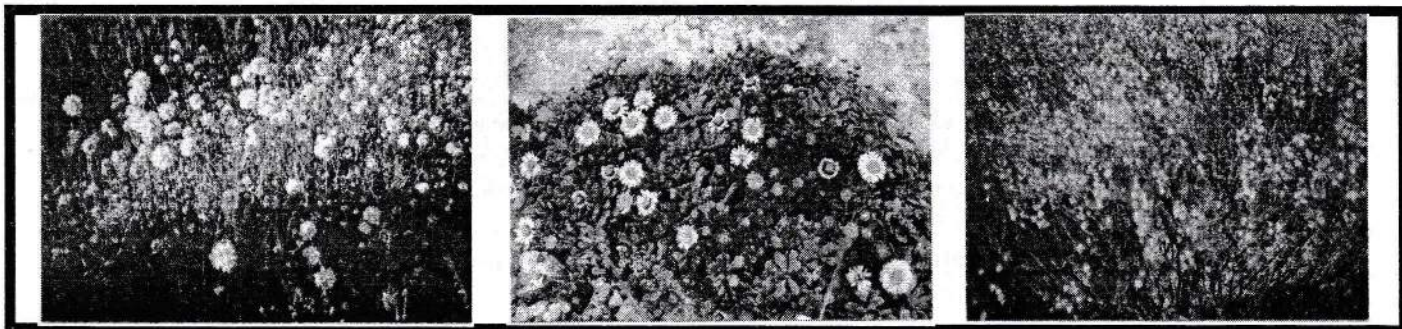


Dancing in the Desert

Lisa O'Beirne

Lisa has been working with music and creative dance, teaching children since 1990, and with a therapeutic perspective since 2000. Post-graduate study of creative arts therapy influenced her approach of teaching music and dance to focus on the participants' creative initiative and expression, and led to a move away from the education field. Work as a recreation officer at the Woomera Immigration Reception and Detention Centre was amongst a welfare/social work team, and the approach to facilitating programs from this perspective was new. It led to seeking work in community work positions where she now works as a community support worker for people with psychiatric disabilities. This role involves individual outreach with a number of clients and day program sessions, where there are possibilities for creative therapy to take place.



Spring in the desert 2001, in northern South Australia, is an expansive carpet of red and green that undulates ever so slightly beneath the constant blue sky. This kind of landscape gives you the feeling that you can reach your hand right into the sky, no trees diminish your height, no vertical comparison, just the rolling moors that consist of ankle high succulent shrubs in the red earth. The wind creates the dynamics, sending waves of sound and clouds tumbling around. It is almost entirely flat land between the coast of Western Australia and South Australia, and when the west wind picks up, it really gains momentum.

There are prominent roads and occasional clusters of buildings, and near the township of Woomera, a palisade reinforced compound where I am working for twelve weeks. On entering the compound, the towering fencing that holds the tumble-weed of razor wire at its tips has a steely presence. Walking through the gateways and fenced passageways, the fences blur the view of the other side. Within the central zone, there is relief for the eye, nurtured garden-beds and flowering gumtrees. Persian or Arabic music floats from central broadcast, and I can see through the inner fences to the five surrounding compounds where the residents of the Immigrate Reception and Processing Centre go about their days. There are delicious smells of food being cooked, and as the first few weeks unfold, I cajole myself to see this as a sort of caravan-park. I work within a team of welfare and recreation officers; there are nine or so of us, along with about six teachers and eight interpreters in Programs, separate from the medical and psychology personnel. Welfare and Recreation have daily meetings to plan and reflect about what is happening with

the residents. We are aiming to provide activities for all groups of men, women, teenagers and children, including discussion groups of health topics, Australian life and cultural. As a creative arts therapist, I am keen to play and hope to attend to the spiritual health of the residents. There are many budding guitarists eager for lessons, games and songs with the children, musical groups sitting through the afternoons drinking tea and smoking but when a concert is organised, the whole community within the compound gathers in the dining hall to listen to their favourite songs. There are at least three predominant ethnic groups here, and the concerts are a multicultural event. There is quite an atmosphere humming and when someone gets up to dance, it escalates. Here in this forum, the men perform; strident and charismatic dances that thrill the audience, singing laughing. Some particularly talented teenage boys take the floor, encouraged by the response. Within this atmosphere we could be anywhere.

During the course of the day, women have time to get together in the communal recreation room and as they choose, do some yoga or dance. I was able to work with these groups, who were very responsive to yoga and ch'i-gong exercises, feeling the benefits of stretching and breathing deeply. On average, twice weekly sessions for each compound would come about. We would usually gather as a group, sit down to take shoes off, take unnecessary head-scarves and chadors off once inside the concealed room and commence. There would be care taken to protect against the anxieties of being seen dancing or even for some, being known to be dancing. It was not hard to see what

significance dance has to their lives, and I felt extremely privileged to have been able to be in some part of it. The dancing would unfold, rhythmical stepping and swaying, traditional clapping and stepping configurations, belly-dancing and expressive hand flourishes. The women were laughing and having fun. Typical men's dances would involve vigorous shoulder shimmying. The music and dancing culture of the residents was healthy and rejuvenating for them, people of all ages would know and sing the same songs. There were experienced yoga practisers who would instruct meditation and yoga classes, so wherever possible this was supported. The benefits were commented upon as contributing to the residents' coping with uncertainty and anxiety that was experienced at unique levels in these conditions; waiting for unknown lengths of time and the frustration of having to ask and wait for every step or request to be arranged.

There were some very distressing times for individuals forging their application processes and the times when many residents would riot with anger. These times were well known and predictable most of the time to the detention management. In my opinion the nature of detention is a set up for these kinds of manifestations. The rage and destruction smouldered and stayed painful, and it became more evident that the only real healing from this would be release from it. Their music and dance was a way of keeping their lives joyful in the meantime and I hoped that the fires of the rage would not affect their ability to experience the happiness and peacefulness present throughout the group sessions. It was an experience of immense contrasts. Since August 2001, most of the 1500 residents have been released. I have good faith that once able to initiate their community meals and everyday sharing of music and dance in the cities it is happening for them, with dancing and laughter blooming all-over again.